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Book Review: Vanished Act: The Life and Art of Weldon Kees

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Vanished Act: The Life and Art of Weldon Kees.
By James Reidel. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. xvii + 398 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$35.00.

When poet Weldon Kees walked away into the fogs of the Golden Gate Bridge he made

his life and ironic style into the stuff of myth. In the years since his disappearance he has commonly been remembered less for his remarkable verses than as an emblematic suicide or runaway or victim of his times.

These are unpromising circumstances for a sober biographer, who could only be compromised by the temptation to exorcise old demons. It is no discredit to James Reidel's industry or acuity that after some 360 informative pages Kees and his terrible privacies remain at arm's length. Reidel's research is heroically exhaustive and scrupulous. His narrative follows in sometimes excruciating detail Kees's relatively well-documented life from his boyhood in the Beatrice, Nebraska, of the 1920s, through his Midwestern education, primarily at Lincoln, to library and literary work in Denver, an artistic flowering in New York City during World War II, then to San Francisco where the trail runs out at the entrance to the Golden Gate Bridge.

Reidel clearly assumes that if he is faithful in small things larger issues will take care of themselves. That they do so only intermittently is partly a function of Kees's own personality, which was fragmentary and elusive even to himself. He seemed always to be adrift in a maze of mirrors, in the process of composing an identity he might live with. He was an urbane man who could never break his psychic or fiscal dependence on small-town Nebraska. He was a nihilist and depressive who could also be uncommonly funny. Although he has been called a renaissance man, he never quite became all, or any, of the men he aspired to be. He was almost a novelist, almost a critic, almost an important abstract painter, almost a musician, almost a playwright, almost a filmmaker, almost an impresario. Even his durable poetry was never fully carried through. It was an intense but inconsistent priority.

What cannot emerge spontaneously from an assembly of details about such a fugitive subject is, for instance, a coherent sense of his political development, if indeed he had any. Or of his marriage. Or of how homosexual he might have been. Kees wrote letters full of

contempt for gay men, but Reidel hints throughout his study about troublesome ambiguities of desire. Such issues are obviously touchy, but once raised they should be defined and brought into focus. Similar problems of diffusion weaken the characterization of people around Kees, most seriously with regard to Ann Swan, his wife, and Norris Getty, his best friend and something of an alter ego.

To push such second-guessing further would be to risk injustice to Reidel, whose important and welcome biography opens windows on things previously only half-known, not only on the haunted life of his enigmatic protagonist, but on a particularly interesting cycle of our literary history.

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